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Hearing and Obedience in Traditional Cultures as a Condition for Transcendent Communication

In the year of Karol Szymanowski, let us adopt as our motto one of the composer's later utterances: 'Music, as the supreme form of art, speaks from heart to heart'.¹

This internalisation of the musical message also leads to far-reaching sublimations in culture, evoking Neoplatonic, Judaeo-Christian and Muslim mysticism and also the wonderful Garden, which may also be understood as a protective area for man's communication and communion with the Mind, Father, God.

A perusal of writings from late antiquity, such as Plotinus (*Enneads*) and Proclus (*Elements of Theology*), and of mediaeval Christian and Sufic treatises, leads one to reflect on the foundations of the soundworlds of the modern era, as well, and on the ideas or states of awareness which have given rise to artistic initiation and creation. More specifically, this perusal leads to the following general observations:

The **integrity of notions** (approaching or yielding to the attraction of the One, His reflection or trace) on different levels:

1. *External senses*; these are considered in terms of their interconnectedness: hearing, sight, smell, touch and taste; we also note the presence of a biologically-based hierarchy – at the beginning there is hearing, but the highest is taste (in mediaeval Christian mysticism, the word *sapientia* = wisdom was derived from the word *sapor* = taste). Hearing (including prenatal hearing) refers to faith; taste to the figure of nourishment; regular nourishment sustains life and drink preserves love.

¹ Karol Szymanowski, *Dokumenty* [Documents] PRCD 106. A CD released in connection with the Polish Radio Music Festival Szymanowski and His Europe (Warsaw, 1997).

2. *Actions*; hearing is linked to obedience, the ears with volition; he who follows a voice will hear more; the most obedient will hear the most; for the disobedient, meanwhile, everything will lose its savour. Animate nature is seen as a model of obedience to the Creator.

3. *Knowledge*; this is perceived as an organic whole, in which the parts are mutually beneficial, hence the metaphor of the human body or of the tree. Roger Bacon (1210?–1294?) states: ‘The part outside the whole is like a plucked-out eye or a cut-off leg. No science will reap any benefits without another. Every single discipline is a part of the organisation of the whole, is a bloom or branch of the tree of universal knowledge’.²

4. *The common vector and mutual attraction of natural and supernatural reality*. Each external sense has its internal equivalent. The path of man is either ascending natural or virtual reality, the transformation of external impressions into internal senses, that is, the direction of an independent effort to climb (the archetype of ascending the steps of the temple, of climbing upwards), or else yielding to the attraction of supernatural reality (‘mooring’ at a wharf, as it were). Let us also note the intuitive sense of the principles of universal gravity.³ Just as an object falls (accelerating) to the ground, so an obedient soul falls into God’s arms. Christ’s Ascension was supposedly just as natural as the fall of an object to the ground. This surmounting of earthly gravity by another force of attraction directs us to a cosmological vision. The sun cannot be at the centre, since God created it. Thus mediaeval mysticism brings to mind a system that is at least galacticocentric. The common vector stimulates symbolic memory. Another archetypal metaphor (besides climbing upwards) would appear to be ‘hunting’ God. The supreme ecstasy of the mystics is to merge with God – to consume and be consumed. The other way of merging is the flame of love. Let us quote the confessions or counsels of the mystics:

James of Milan, who lived in the second half of the thirteenth century: ‘Anchor your mind in God alone, and cling only to Him. Then He will let you hear the melody of His words, open to you the treasure of His

² Roger Bacon, [Fakty, wypowiedzi, wybór tekstów] [Facts, utterances, selected texts], in *Antologia mistyków franciszkańskich* [An anthology of Franciscan mystics], ed. Fr Salezy Kafel OFMCap., vol. 2: 13th–14th c., joint trans. (Warsaw, 1986), 70.

³ Francis of Meyronnes (1288?–1327), ‘Traktat o kontemplacji’ [*Tractatus de Contemplatione*]: ‘For just as the earth attracts something heavy, so the ultimate goal attracts all our human feelings. It is proper to this natural motion that it is swifter at its end, not its beginning’, in *Antologia mistyków franciszkańskich* [An anthology of Franciscan mystics], ed. Fr Salezy Kafel OFMCap., vol. 3: 14th c., joint trans. (Warsaw, 1987), 262.

wisdom, and shower you with kisses sweet as honey. You will be unable to bear the surfeit of ecstasy and, falling into His arms, you will drown in an ocean of sweetness'.⁴

Saint Bernard: 'In that kingdom and midday feast will appear the glare of the summer sun, the bliss of spring, autumn's abundance and winter's rest. As infinite goodness, God will allow all the feasters and inhabitants of His kingdom to share in Him, each according to his abilities, and He himself will fill the internal senses with the greatest pleasures. God will become a mirror for the eye, a harp for hearing, honey for tasting, balsam for smelling and a gentle bloom for touching'.⁵

The path to mystical cognition can be described in the following order: 1. Listening, 2. Tasting, 3. Uniting. Since communication – including musical communication – is conditional on hearing and listening, most of our considerations will be devoted to the 'first degree':

Hearing has biological foundations. There are two extremes of listening/obedience: a plant and Lucifer. If we obey God like nature, we will hear nature. The ideal of listening/obedience – in female mysticism – is a plant in the Garden of Love. Margaret of Cortona (1247–1297) hears the Voice of Christ: 'You are my plant, which revives dry plants, as from you flows water, which waters the roots of withered trees'. 'Daughter, I planted you in the garden of my love'.⁶ The model of nature is distinct in the writings of Hildegard of Bingen, in which paradise and the soul are bonded by eternal verdure, that is, harmony, and Adam's resonant singing joins with the singing of angels.⁷ Characteristic of female mediæval mystics is the form of transmission; their inspired words were written down as they were produced. Male mysticism, meanwhile, is perpetuated by treatises written independently.

The question of hearing is addressed by the Psalms, the Song of Songs and Sufic thought, which all feature listening intently to nature, especially to birds, as they are capable of singing about love and without the figure of angels. The Blessed Ramón Lull (1235–1316?), a 'pilgrim of love', writes poetic prose in his *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved*:

The bird sang in the garden of the Beloved. The Lover came, and he said to the bird: 'If we understand not one another's speech, we may make ourselves under-

⁴ James of Milan, 'Wezwanie do miłości' [*Stimulus Amoris*], in *Antologia mistyków*, vol. 2, 112.

⁵ Rudolf of Biberach, 'Siedem dróg do wieczności' [*De Septem Itineribus Aeternitatis*], in *Antologia mistyków*, vol. 3, 254.

⁶ Giunta Bevegnati, 'Życie św. Małgorzaty z Kortony' [The life of Saint Margaret of Cortona], in *Antologia mistyków*, vol. 2, 89, 90, 97, 100.

⁷ Błażej Matusiak OP, *Hildegarda z Bingen. Teologia muzyki* [Hildegard of Bingen. A theology of music] (Kraków, 2003), 82–84, 98, 111, 116.

stood by love; for in thy song I see my Beloved before mine eyes.' [...] The bird sang upon a branch in leaf and flower, and the breeze caused the leaves to tremble, and bore away the scent of the flowers. 'What means the trembling of the leaves, and the scent of the flowers?' asked the bird of the Lover. He answered: 'The trembling of the leaves signifies obedience, and the scent of the flowers, adversity'.⁸

In addition, in singing we are to listen to (that is to love), not only the Word, but also the imagined Voice of the Beloved.

In the chapter 'On listening' in a treatise of Sufism by imam al-Kushairi,⁹ we find the following formulation: 'He who demands spectacle but does not listen to the voice of birds or the slamming of doors or the murmur of the wind is impoverished in his demands'.¹⁰ 'Listening is a call and a delight on the way to one's goal'.¹¹ One is reminded here involuntarily of the admission of a traditional folk singer in the region of Zywiec: 'Song is the summoning of love'.

As already mentioned, for female mystics the model of obedience to God is animate nature. For men, meanwhile, the model of obedience is processed reality, e.g. a musical instrument, apt to become the figure of a man. Theological narrative also refers to instrument-making; for example, the seven words of Christ are considered by Saint Bonaventure (1221–1274) in terms of the seven strings of the harp.¹² The instrument indicates the integrity and diversity of spiritual reality. 'Saint Jerome explained the words of the psalm "make music to the Lord with the harp" as follows: "May no string of virtue be broken! The harp has many strings, and if one of them is broken, one cannot play on the harp. So a man, be he even a saint, if he is lacking one of the virtues, cannot emit a full voice of holiness"'.¹³ Gilbert of Tournai (?–1284) writes in his Treatise on Peace: '[...] among the angels there is order [...] among the stars as well [...] Hence derives also the diversity among religious orders and brethren [...] This diversity declares the wisdom of the Creator, and is it-

⁸ Ramón Lull, *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved*, trans. E. Allison Peers (London: SPCK, 1923; cit. from repr. Cambridge, Ontario: In parentheses, 2000), 19, 23.

⁹ *Ar-Risāla al-Quṣayriyya czyli Traktat o sufizmie imama Abū al-Qāsim al-Quṣayrīego (986–1072)*, trans. and introd. Revd. Jerzy Nosowski (Warsaw, 1997).

¹⁰ Ibid., 338.

¹¹ Ibid., 339.

¹² Saint Bonaventure, *Pisma ascetyczno-mistyczne. Mistyczny Krzew Winny czyli traktat o Męce Pańskiej* [Writings on aesthetics and mysticism. *Vitis Mystica* (forma brevis) seu *Planctus de Passione Domini*], trans. Cecylia Niezgoda OFMConv. (Warsaw, 1984), 174–179.

¹³ Anonym, 'Medytacja ubogiego w samotności' [*Meditatio Pauperis in Solitudine*], in *Antologia mistyków*, vol. 2, 26.

self a sign and cause of beauty [...] as in the case of the harp, which has many strings and emits concordant voices'.¹⁴

The work of Jacopone da Todi (1230–1306) is an example of the coexistence of poetry and theological treatise. His conviction that the world and everything can be heard everywhere in God and through God may be linked to the Pythagorean legacy.

'If I wish to go out in front of the gate, / Where I can give myself up to listening, / I think of the sound [...] and what does it mean? / – It depicts You, Lord!! / I cannot escape through that gate /– Love is that which can be heard'.¹⁵

The integrity of the senses leads to *listening with the whole body*. As Sufic thought indicates, every part of the body participates in listening: 'And what falls in the eye, cries, and what falls on the tongue, shouts, and what falls on the hand, rends garments and strikes, and what falls on the leg, dances'.¹⁶ There are also different degrees of listening. One can listen (for a moment), listen intently (listening with one's state of mind) and hear (hearing through the Truth).¹⁷ In other words, listening is effected through nature (the feeling of contentment at a good and beautiful voice), thanks to one's state of mind (connected with reflection, dwelling on meaning) and through the Truth (through God and for God).

In Christian mysticism, hearing is considered within the context of man's threefold endowment with spirit, soul and senses. God gave us ears of the body (sensory), ears of reason (the hearing of the soul, or mind, discernment) and ears of the spirit, equating to the hearing of the heart.

'Ears for listening are possessed by the man who has the spirit of understanding and the feeling of love and has deserved that which is spoken of and promised'.¹⁸ 'The hearing of the body involves only hearing, whereas the hearing of the heart involves at once both hearing and understanding'.¹⁹ 'Every desire is a great calling'.²⁰ In the opinion of Saint Bernard, it is not a physical voice or images that are involved here, but

¹⁴ Gilbert of Tournai (?–1284), 'Traktat o pokoju' [*Tractatus de Pace et de Tranquillitate*], in *Antologia mistyków*, vol. 2, 33.

¹⁵ Jacopone da Todi, 'Jak dusza przy pomocy zmysłów znajduje Boga we wszystkich stworzeniach' [How the Soul Through the Senses Finds God in All Creatures], in *Antologia mistyków*, vol. 2, 166.

¹⁶ *Ar-Risāla al-Qūṣayriyya*, 345.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 345.

¹⁸ Rudolf of Biberach, 'Siedem dróg do wieczności' [*De Septem Itineribus Aeternitatis*] (see above, n. 5), 63, quoted utterance of Richard of St Victor.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 146, quoted utterance of Br. Haymo.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

speech (the Word), which is a gift, and the soul's response is wonder mixed with thanksgiving.²¹ So it is the voice, not of the mouth, but of the heart's thoughts. 'The most effective voice for the most secret ears of God are not our words, but our beseeching desires'.²² 'Revealed is the Truth of Paths and one hears the dove's voice of the Word Incarnate on our earth'.²³

A man who listens with all his being experiences a synergy of impressions. Noted many times in mediaeval writings is the intensity of reception, of reaction to a voice and to singing. Hearing a voice or listening to a sound or to singing can result in a cry (of delight or otherwise), falling to the ground, suddenly keeling over, hair falling out, and even death. Listening with all one's being also results in a wealth of associations. 'A wheel drawing water says: God, God', 'A bell says: Praise be to God, truly, truly';²⁴ it also leads to a believer rising up among a group of listeners and expressing his wonder through dance.²⁵

Indeed, the question of dance is particularly crucial to mystical experience. In early Christian gnosis, dance appears as the reinforcement of a message – a hymn danced in a round with God at the centre.²⁶ Dance might be a means of attaining extraordinary states of awareness or might itself be a synthesis of all means of communication. Dance is seen as nourishment, as intoxication:

So if we long to experience such intoxication and spiritual delights of the spirit, let us strive internally and absolutely to love our Lord and at all hours to fervently desire and yearn for Divine contemplation. When our spirit is fully intoxicated by this abundance of internal delight, it will forget about everything that was and that is. From its excess, the spirit will be inclined to leave itself, to joyful leaps, and due to a wondrous gladness it will be suddenly transported to some superterrestrial experience.²⁷

At the height of the Middle Ages, dance gave way to meditation. The only apology of dance as an amorous fervour can be found in Jacopone da Todi²⁸:

²¹ Ibid., 66–67, quoted utterance of St Bernard.

²² Ibid., 67.

²³ Ibid., 52.

²⁴ *Ar-Risāla al-Quṣayriyya*, 344.

²⁵ Ibid., 343.

²⁶ Anonym, 'Hymn Chrystusa tańczącego' [Hymn of the dancing Christ], in *Muza chrześcijańska* [The Christian muse], ed. Marek Starowieyski (Kraków, 1995), 53–56.

²⁷ Rudolf of Biberach, 'Siedem dróg' (see above, n. 5), 248, quoted utterance of Richard of St Victor.

²⁸ Jacopone da Todi, 'Taniec miłości; O Chryste! Mój Ukochany' [Dance of love; O Christ! My Beloved], in *Antologia mistyków*, vol. 2, 180, 182, 183.

May every lover who loves the Lord / Join the dance, and sing his love

May every lover join the dance / Desiring only That which made him;
May his love-inflamed heart / Ever turn him into one great ardour.

[...]

From that Divine Ardour, / When my soul nears Him,
No other feeling will endure there!

Boundless is the soul's joy / In this wondrous Paradise of Delight
And filled with all Sweetness – / For all there is new!!!

At this new experience / The whole soul is rapt
and the heart moves / to the breath of the Holy Spirit!
The soul awakes.../ Listens to music...
And in this melody / it swoons with love.

[...]

When its (love's) spirit so rapt rises above all places,
it begins its song of joy / and its poem of love!
It crosses now a difficult river, / the only obstacle here –
in the elation of its heart, / which soars higher still!

The question inevitably arises here of the possibility of becoming possessed, especially since harmful curiosity can enter through hearing.²⁹ Five recommendations or guarantees can be enumerated:

1. The soul (spirit) should remain perfectly quiet, so as to rise above itself.

'May the imagination also remain silent, refraining from forming images. For it finds itself between reason and the external senses. Because when we sing psalms [...] we wish to free our hearts from representations'.³⁰ 'The beloved turns to Simple Nature, and it finds truth, peace and calmness, in a noiseless place it listens to that most beautiful song'.³¹

2. Listening intently to three books. Cardinal Matthew of Aquasparta (1240?–1302) sees here a unity of three books: 'The Book of Creation, in which God is looked upon as existing now, the Book of the Holy Scripture, in which He is listened to as He speaks, and the Book of Conscience, in which God is experienced and felt as He fills the soul with rapture and caresses it, so to speak'.³² This 'polyphony' of sorts ought to protect one from madness.

3. Another means of prevention is self-control, which means that entering and leaving a state of ecstasy is a conscious act. Generally speaking, however, as Blessed Angela of Foligno (1248?–1309) writes: 'Beware

²⁹ Gilbert of Tournai, 'Traktat o pokoju' (see above, n. 14), 41.

³⁰ Ibid., 41.

³¹ Ibid., 42.

³² Cardinal Matthew of Aquasparta, 'Mowy o Błogosławionej Maryi Dziewicy' [*Sermones de B.M. Virgine*], in *Antologia mistyków*, vol. 2, 157.

your raptures, that is, the impulses of your own spirit, or – before taking that path – check to see what is its beginning, middle and end, and how far it converges with the path shown in the Book of Life, and only take this path that far, and no more’,³³ since ‘There is nothing in this world, be it man, devil or anything, that I consider suspicious to such a degree as love, since love penetrates the soul more deeply than joy and more deeply than anything else’.³⁴

4. As a further specific for madness or utter distraction, James of Milan gives an integral musical form, since only a musical whole can bring us closer to the One: ‘These considerations, although touching different strings of the heart, comprise for the attentive listener an harmonious whole and for pure ears sound like a single melody’.³⁵

5. The final guarantee against possession is the unusual frequency and dynamic of the Voice of God – ‘infrasounds’ that communicate with a person’s heart, murmurs of a breeze or a stream, and finally a cosmic bang. Only the good-natured Hildegard of Bingen thought that the archangel’s trumpet merely praised God. Other descriptions of the final trumpet (in both the Bible and the Koran) speak of a calling to judgment, and so of the expression of God’s justice and the end of the old world. Bertram of Ahlen (?–1315?) comments thus: ‘And after the fire came a gentle whisper’ (1 Kgs 19:12), continuing, ‘Like a murmur has no distinctive sound, so what happens in such a vision can only be somehow whispered [...] by the inner lips of our soul, which can neither express it clearly nor name it’.³⁶ Roger of Provence (?–1287) writes of ‘infrasounds’: ‘Oh Lord, whose ears will be able to open, so as to hear that inaudible voice? Oh, Lord! How fervently would that man love you! More than that, he would forget about himself’.³⁷

A survey of the problem of hearing and listening allows us to speak of the differences between general, universal culture (in the original sense: popular, folk culture, as referring to God’s People) and monastic (‘qualified’), isolated, select culture. Popular cultures listen to voices ‘filtered’ by the landscape and nature (the echo of a forest or mountains, the voices of animals, and also inner resonance, as expressed in the frequent anthropomorphism of musical terminology). Qualified/select culture encom-

³³ Blessed Aniela of Foligno, ‘[Dokumenty, listy, pouczenia]’ [Documents, letters and information], in *Antologia mistyków*, vol. 2, 230.

³⁴ Ibid., 238.

³⁵ James of Milan, ‘Wezwanie do miłości’ [*Stimulus Amoris*] (see above, n. 4), 106.

³⁶ Bertram of Ahlen, ‘Chwała Pana Nowego Wieku’ [*De Laude Domini Novi Saeculi*], in *Antologia mistyków*, vol. 2, 273.

³⁷ Roger of Provence, ‘[Wypowiedzi i medytacje]’ [Utterances and meditations], in *Antologia mistyków*, vol. 2, 56.

passes theomorphism – a constant movement from visible reality to invisible, symbolic reality.

The notion of **taste** is construed from the verses: 'Taste and see that the Lord is good' (Ps. 34:8) and '[...] Eat, O friends, and drink' (S. of S. 5:1).³⁸ 'Taste' – hence the justification of moderation, which is the source of wisdom. Tasting is a synthesis of external and internal senses, and experience is seen by the mediaeval mystics as the highest form of cognition. A certain paradox may be noted here: we are to experience abstract reality through the most primitive of the senses. 'Yet the infinite wisdom of God is due infinite contemplation'³⁹ and a 'base of humility', since human reason is to Divine realities what a bat's eye is to sunlight (according to Aristotle) and what a man born without hearing is to the pleasure derived from listening to music (according to Avicenna).⁴⁰

Unity is an ineffable state, attained in various ways, with the aim of gathering everything into one, community of life, merging or a state of oblivion. The surest context of unity is the passage to another world. Unity is accompanied by the symbolism of death (and marriage) and by poetical images, metaphors,⁴¹ such as 'the Gateway to life', 'entering perfect satisfaction', 'leaving prison', 'an end to exile', 'the end of hardship', 'a haven', 'the end of a pilgrimage', 'release from the heaviest burden' (the body), 'dismounting an enraged horse', 'being saved from a collapsing house', 'an end to all worries', 'getting out of all dangers', 'an end to all evil', 'release from nature', 'homecoming' and 'entering glory'. Yet we draw closer to God, 'not through stages of location, but through resemblance'.⁴²

The passage from death to life is rendered even more eloquently by Hellwig of Magdeburg (?–1297). Having expressed the desire for freedom and set out the contrasts between the mortal and immortal worlds, he defines God by surpassing the formulations of His attributes that were current in his day:

Then, o Lord, may you break the shackles and free my soul, that it might through You become truly free, a free daughter of heavenly Jerusalem, and fly off in freedom like a little bird and find its home. That home where live the blessed and where You are endlessly adored. But how, whence and whither will fly my soul? With sweet joy, as it fears nothing, with no delay, as nothing restrains it, in joyous cheer, as it does not feel this painfully, but finds in it the greatest pleasure.

³⁸ *The NIV Study Bible* (London, 2000), 801, 991.

³⁹ Roger Bacon, '[Fakty, wypowiedzi, wybór tekstów]' (see above, n. 2), 78.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴¹ Rudolf of Biberach, 'Siedem dróg' (see above, n. 5), 250.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 48.

But whence and whither will it hie? From snares to nest, from the mire to green pastures, from a terrible prison to a palace, from sea to port, from cottage to castle, from fire and water to refreshment, from exile to home, from vinegar plant to vineyard, from a vale of tears to a mountain of joys, from a place of fear and limitless desert to fertile pastures and a place of eternal happiness, securer than a nest, lovelier than a garden, more magnificent than any palace, stronger than any gate, securer than a fortified tower, more pleasant than any refreshment, more longed-for than a homeland, richer in stores than all cellars and chambers, higher than all mountains. What more could I desire? I want to love You, Lord, my strength, You are my force, my refuge, my salvation, o my God and my refuge!⁴³

I would consider the link between hearing and obedience and the bond between man and the Creator to be a determinant of traditional culture, regardless of how God manifests himself or is presented. Without this premise it is difficult to imagine the original unity of means of expression and communication and music as a medium transcending historical and social factors. The old layers of ethnic culture and the cultures derived from the Great Texts are linked by listening that is integral, cross-sectional and ethical. Hearing without obedience calls into question the full reception of the music of former generations and former masters.

Translated by John Comber

⁴³ Hellwig of Magdeburg, 'Tak chciałbym umrzeć' [Thus is how I would like to die], in *Antologia mistyków*, vol. 2, 104.